

Narratives old and new: the role of translation in intercultural dialogue today

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Translation was identified by the Anna Lindh Foundation as being central to intercultural dialogue. Analysing the trends of mutual interest across the region, the patterns of intercultural encounters, and the mounting centrality of digital media in the cultural realm, Alexandra Büchler highlights the need to diversify translation policy in the region, putting youth and new media at the centre of the process, and devising new tools and narratives that can elicit empathy and provide a better understanding of the question of co-existence.

The Anna Lindh Foundation/Ipsos Intercultural Trends Survey has, with its third edition, turned into a longitudinal study tracing the development of mutual perceptions of people living on both sides of the Mediterranean over the past eight years; a period characterised by tumultuous transformations following the financial crash and economic recession, regime changes across the Arab world, the refugee crisis, and the rise of religious fundamentalism on the one hand and right-wing populism on the other.

Looking back at how perceptions of the Mediterranean and regional cooperation have developed over time, among the most encouraging findings is the belief, expressed across the region, that the Union for the Mediterranean and the Neighbourhood Policy would generally bring benefits. The region continues to be associated with positive notions, such as hospitality, but it is also perceived as a source of conflict and a site of turmoil and insecurity. Not surprisingly, association of

the Mediterranean with migration issues became one of the leading characteristics in the most recent poll.

While these perceptions reflect the troubled reality of recent years, one of the most significant findings is that the media are seen as contributing to a negative, rather than positive image of the region, and that their impact on changing views and perceptions is at best limited. At the same time, the high number of Southern and Eastern Mediterranean (SEM) respondents reporting not having 'seen, read or heard anything in the media' about Europe is disconcerting and raises questions about the reliability of mainstream media as a source of balanced information.

Continued interest in the opposite side of the Mediterranean

While none of the questions in the 2016 Survey refer specifically to cultural activities in the narrower sense,

Chart 15.1 Interest in news and information about cultural life and lifestyle in SEM/European countries

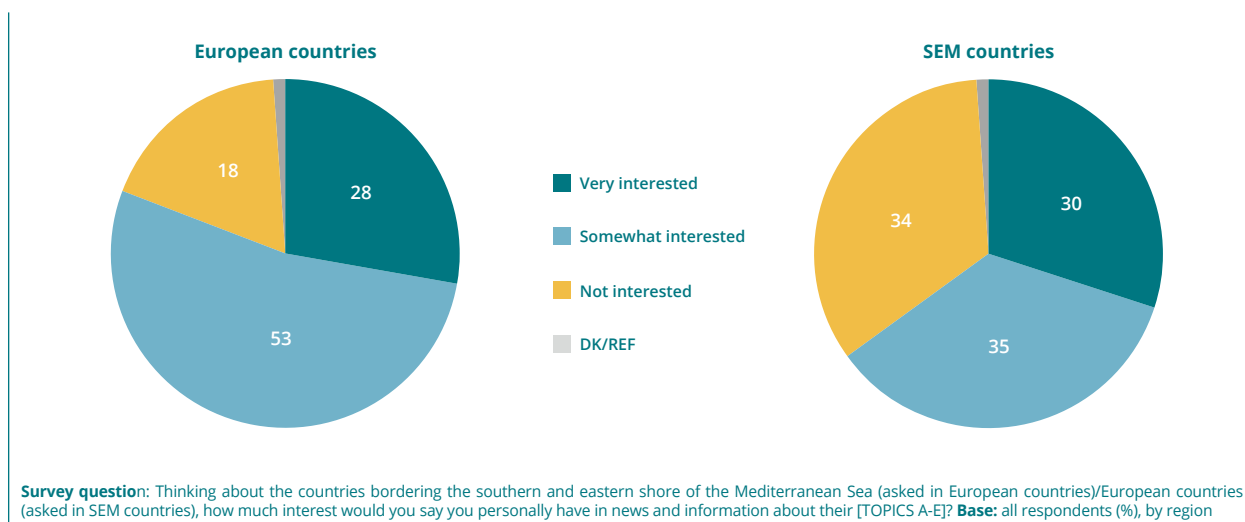
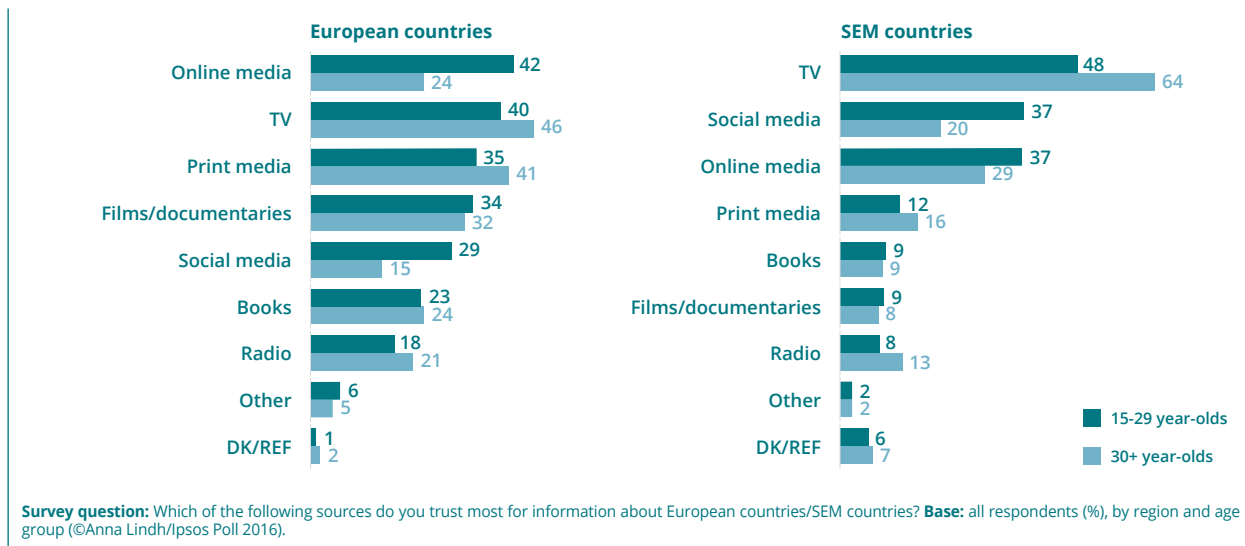


Chart 15.2

Most trusted media sources for cross-cultural reporting, by age group



the findings are relevant to the fields of art, culture and translation, particularly where they are based on questions about interest in cultural life, sources of news and information, cross-cultural encounters, and modes of interaction between individuals from European and SEM countries.

Encouragingly, a high proportion of European respondents reported being ‘very interested’ or ‘somewhat interested’ in cultural life and lifestyle of SEM countries, and, while interest in the opposite direction somewhat trails behind, mutual interest is clearly high and shows an increase across the region since the first Poll (Chart 15.1).

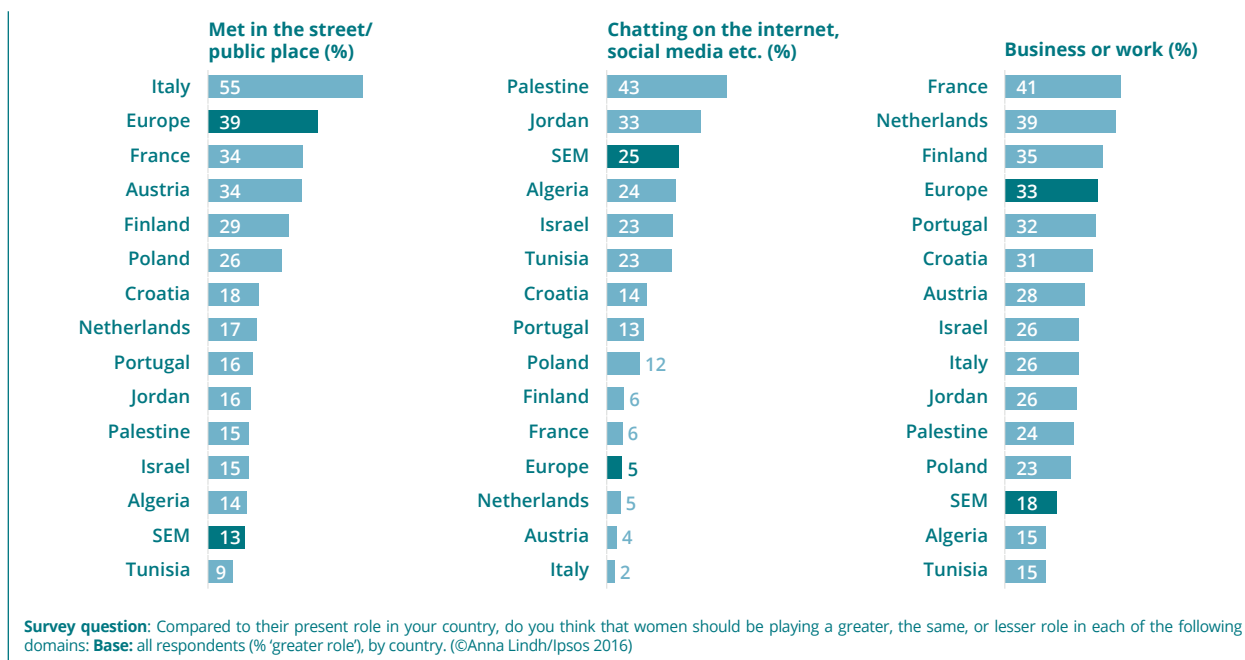
The question to ask therefore is whether direct cultural experience and involvement could contribute to a positive change in mutual perceptions and a deeper mutual understanding where media reporting fails to do so. As the earlier reports confirm, there is a growing ‘appetite for mutual knowledge’ and ‘demand for exchanges, mobility and personal contact’. While cultural relations have historically played a role as a soft power tool, what will help meet this demand is not a ‘top-down vision’, but a sense of ownership of the common space and of the policies affecting it. In other words, a meaningful, sustainable engagement driven by civil society is what is called for in situations of rapid political change that may occasionally fuel distrust in state-structures and require equally rapid responses from the ground bypassing the slow-moving wheels of state bureaucracy. And this is precisely where the Anna Lindh Foundation can continue playing a role by mobilising and connecting civil society networks to communicate, reflect and collaborate on culture-powered social change.

Translation as a pivotal activity for dialogue in the Euro-Mediterranean region

In its previous programme cycle, the Anna Lindh Foundation identified translation as being central to intercultural dialogue when, in the 2010 Report, Thierry Fabre advocated the circulation of ‘thoughts and literature’ that would be best achieved by a ‘vast and thoughtful translation initiative, built on reciprocity and in the framework of multilateral perspective’ and stated that a ‘policy of inter-knowledge, based on translation, is a strategic priority’. In the same year, the Anna Lindh Foundation commissioned a large study of translation flows in the region. The study, launched in 2012, mapped translation between 57 language pairs, taking into account not only statistics, but, importantly, the ‘various aspects and actors of translation, including authors, translators, publishers, book sellers, librarians, critics and funding donors’. It also paid attention to transversal questions such as translation of various genres from fiction and non-fiction, to books for children and theatre, shedding light on the ‘challenges of translation from economic, cultural and political perspective’.

The study was intended to provide a basis for future research and continued debates on the subject, with the ultimate aim of formulating a Euro-Mediterranean Translation Programme. The individual studies resulting from the mapping can be found on the website of the project coordinator, Transeuropéennnes, while the summary can be downloaded from the Anna Lindh Foundation website. Conferences, projects and meetings organised by the key partners in the project (Transeuropéennnes, Literature Across Frontiers and the Next Page Foundation) contributed not only to continued in-depth reflection on how to best foster translation in the region but, crucially, to the networking necessary for the building of future contacts and initiatives.

Chart 15.3 Cross-cultural encounters: method of interaction



In June 2016, the Translation4Dialogue Conference was held in the Slovenian coastal town of Piran, heralding the next phase in the process of formulating a future programme. While the mapping placed an emphasis on translation of human sciences as a conduit for the transfer of knowledge, often reflecting the academic orientation of the researchers and project leaders, the 2016 conference was attended by organisations and individuals involved in writing, translation, publishing and projects on the ground. Numerous issues ranging from the need to bring people together in face-to-face encounters to the importance of targeting children and youth were highlighted, as were matters of skill development and training of the next generation of writers, translators, publishers, editors, and cultural operators — the key actors who would in turn make interventions at different levels. The Manifesto for Translation issued by the conference highlighted the role of translators as ‘irreplaceable conveyors of works and knowledge, the messengers vital to our cultures’, and called for an ambitious Euro-Mediterranean policy to support translation. However, in the absence of dedicated funding, how feasible is such a policy and what should it prioritise?

Acknowledging the digital shift

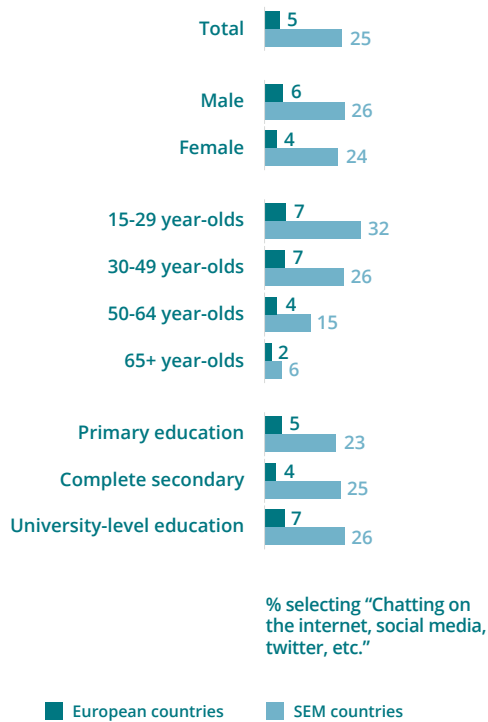
One of the significant findings of the most recent Anna Lindh/Ipsos Survey is that it confirms the rise in the importance of the internet both as a source of news and information and as a medium for interaction between individuals in Europe and SEM countries, particularly among the younger generation, with print media and books ranking relatively low (Chart 15.2).

When it comes to the method of interaction in cross-cultural encounters reported by the Survey, we see a dramatic variation with the highest level of encounters in public spaces reported by Europeans, followed by encounters in business, neighbourhood and schools. Contact on the internet and social media, followed by tourism, ranked highest on the part of SEM countries with the highest incidence of encounters reported by the younger age group (Chart 15.3 and 15.4). The internet is clearly of immense importance, particularly for the youth in SEM countries, who now have less opportunities for direct contact with the increase in travel restrictions in both directions amid security concerns and rigid visa procedures.

The impact of personal contact on views about the other group of countries again varies with almost half of SEM respondents reporting a positive change, while the same percentage of Europeans report no change as they do also in response to the impact of media. Understandably, language is considered to be the most significant barrier to cross-cultural encounters, followed by cultural differences, but the level of tolerance, particularly on the part of European residents, is encouraging and contradicts the picture often painted by popular media. On the whole, respondents from SEM countries come across as more conservative but also curious about Europe and open to the positive impact of personal encounters. There are also some constructive inferences to be gleaned from responses to questions about levels of tolerance towards other cultures and, in particular, responses suggesting that ‘schools are places where children can learn to live in diversity’.

Chart 15.4

Contact on internet and social media as method of interaction in cross-cultural encounters, by region and socio-demographic groups



Survey question: Thinking of this/these person(s) you have interacted with, was this mainly through: **Base:** respondents who have talked to or met someone from a SEM/European country in the past 12 months (% 'Chatting on the internet, social media, twitter, etc.'). by region and socio-demographic groups. (©Anna Lindh/Ipsos Poll 2016).

Strategy for translation in Euro-Mediterranean region: a multi-faceted approach to diversity

The conclusions we can draw from the Anna Lindh/Ipsos Intercultural Trends Survey is that a translation policy for a region as diverse as the Euro-Mediterranean clearly cannot be a blanket one and it cannot privilege one medium alone. The vision of a 'vast translation initiative', advanced in earlier reflections on the subject, does not take into consideration the variety on the ground, whether in terms of cultural and linguistic milieus and markets, or barriers to communication, dissemination and interaction. Nor does its focus on translation of books reflect the need for a broader intercultural dialogue and the implications of the digital shift.

In planning a strategy for translation in the Euro-Mediterranean region, a number of examples of good practice could be elaborated into case studies and analysed to isolate the building blocks of a possible future policy. Successful initiatives in Europe, for instance, include the following: showcasing contemporary culture and literature from the Arab world by the biennial Shubbak Festival in London with an audience of 50,000; the work

of Al Fanar Foundation for Arab Knowledge in Spain with its focus on comics and graphic novels generated by youth and reflecting the multi-cultural nature of today's Spanish society; the short term training models for literary translators developed by Literature Across Frontiers and the Sofia-based Next Page Foundation. Methodologies could be inspired by various documented schools outreach projects operating in a flexible, ad hoc manner, as opposed to attempts to influence an entire curriculum. Facilitating networking and encounters between independent cultural operators to generate new collaborative projects and embedding funding allocations within existing grant programmes, rather than hoping for the unlikely emergence of new funding streams, are the kinds of realistic approaches that would meet the needs of a rapidly shifting cultural, social and political terrain, and are likely to succeed by virtue of their inherent adaptability.

Youth is undoubtedly the central and most urgent target of any initiatives aiming to spark conversations that could eventually combine into a dialogue across the Euro-Mediterranean region. Shifting the focus from the translation of books and printed texts to a broader engagement encompassing a wide use of digital and audio-visual media and interaction with communities and audiences is the way forward if we want the written and spoken word to inspire the younger generation.

Finally, acknowledging the power of creative writing to elicit empathy and understanding, and taking into consideration the growing presence of literary creators and artists from SEM countries in Europe, must become another item on the agenda of a translation policy aiming to foster dialogue. Not only do they tell stories that are of immediate importance to perceptions of their culture of origin but they offer insight into the causes of the refugee crisis and into the migrant experience itself, devising new narratives for our time that can provide an imaginative blueprint for a better understanding of questions surrounding co-existence with immigrant communities and reversing stereotypes.

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